

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Wednesday, September 26, 2018

Brian Ferentz



Q. Your four games, your yards per attempt would be the third highest in your father's tenure here. Are you getting that kind of depth you're looking for in the passing game, especially the last two games?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think it's still really early in the year, so you look at it through four games, and I haven't even looked at that statistic, but I guess that's good. Certainly it is. What we're really trying to do, if you think about the course of a game, what's really important to us is what are we doing on first down? So whether we're running the ball or throwing the ball, are we getting ourselves into a second down that we determined to be manageable?

So our number is four yards on first down. If we're at four yards, we're winning. So if we're at 2nd & 6, we feel pretty good about that. Really, statistically, anymore the way the game has changed a little bit, 2nd & 5 should probably be the number, but we feel like for the way we play, 2nd & 6 is good. We've been able to achieve that goal if you look at it on the whole. But we haven't done that consistently game in and game out.

So the next step for us, whether we're throwing the ball or running it, just staying on schedule and doing that on a more consistent basis.

Q. Another stat for you: First two games you averaged four and a half yards a play roughly. Last two games have been seven. So what has been the big difference in the offense?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think going back to the other question, we've thrown the ball a little more efficiently in the last two ballgames. The more we control the ball on first and second down and do those things, certainly it's easier to create more yardage throwing the ball than running it.

So if you can get a good blend going on first and second down, little run, little pass, and you're being efficient throwing the ball and completing those balls and completing them a little further down the field, then that's a positive. That's where you see those yards per play jump a little bit.

If we can keep that going, well, that would be helpful. It helps you move the ball.

Q. Does your effectiveness with your tight ends enable you to do more things than you normally would because of the way Hockenson and Stanley have both played?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, I think whoever your personnel is, whoever your best personnel is, making sure you get your best guys on the field. For us sometimes that's a fullback, and we like to play with the fullback too.

Brady Ross' impact is not easily measured the same way maybe the tight ends are from a production standpoint. But I think he's caught the ball three times. He's carried it for us a little bit, and certainly really his most valuable contribution doesn't get measured statistically in the blocking game.

Whether it's the tight ends or fullbacks, some games it's receivers, depending on how we're being played. How do we get our best guys on the field? How do we make sure we're utilizing them and giving them opportunities to affect the game in a positive way? The tight ends have been able to do that through three games. Hopefully we can get other groups included as well.

Q. Have you been pleased with the running game so far?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, at times it's been good. But a major key for us moving forward is continuing to establish that running game early in the game, and our offense, whether it's the throw or anything else that we're doing, is going to be determined by how well we can run the ball when everybody in the stadium knows we're going to run the ball.

I think at times we've done a nice job with that. Other times we haven't established it with maybe as much authority as you'd like. So if we can keep that going and we can continue to build on that, I think it's a really positive thing, and it will certainly help our football team.

Q. It appears your offensive line seems to have grown continuity-wise that there is more consistency in their blocking. Am I seeing that right?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Yeah, we've shuffled some guys in now, so even in the last two ballgames, we've had to

play some different combinations, and we've rolled guys through, ask so we've had guys playing different spots and getting different amount of reps. But I think it's a matter of playing multiple spots, we haven't been able to keep one constant lineup as much as we'd like.

But we also know in this day and age, with the way we play, we're going to play with seven, maybe eight guys in the course of the year. We've already done that this year. The more we can get those guys reps and experience, some of those inexperienced guys. Shoot, I remember going into the first game, Cole Banwart has never started in a game, never played in a game, you don't really know what you have there. And two weeks later it's like how are we going to replace Cole Banwart.

Well, two weeks ago we weren't sure Cole Banwart could do it, now we're worried about who we're going to play with. So the fact that we've been able to get a bunch of guys in there, and get them reps at different spots. A guy like Dalton Ferguson who has had to jumble around for us a little bit and pull some double duty and has been working as a center in practice.

Because that's the other thing, when Banwart was down, you really lost your second center at that point too. So we had to make sure we had somebody ready to go, we felt like at that point, Dalton was the best option for us.

So all those guys getting experience, getting reps, I think it's a real positive. Really, this is about the time of year, week four, week five when you start to see some of that game experience pay off for some guys, and I think that's probably what you're seeing.

Q. Along the same lines, the wide receivers, through one-third of the season, where are they?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think they've done a nice job. You look at some of the games that we've played, the biggest plays in the games have come out of the receiving corps. So I look back at the Iowa State game where we were really having trouble getting anything going. The two biggest plays in the game were to receivers. It was Ihmir on the post ball, which was a really good play by the quarterback as well.

Then coming back to Brandon on the fade there at the end of the game when we were able to punch it in on the next play. So those are certainly two big plays in a tight, closely contested football game where we weren't really moving the ball effectively offensively for the majority of that game, or whether it's that, you look at the Northern Iowa game, certainly those guys made a couple plays in that game.

Nick had a big day, caught ten balls and made a couple

plays for us. That was with Ihmir not playing. Brandon was able to get a couple catches, contribute a little bit. Then you look at last week, and maybe they didn't make some of the biggest plays in the game from a passing game standpoint, but there were no bigger plays in the game than the in cut that Brandon caught on a play-action pass when he went down and scored, where basically we were blanketed everywhere else on the field.

They did a nice job on coverage, came back to the in-cut. Brandon did a nice job of using his body and winning.

Ihmir on some of the plays that we didn't come up with in the game, but he had the run. I've seen growth there, I've seen production, but we're going to need more. It's kind of like our whole offense. We need to keep improving, keep getting better because the goal is never to beat Northern Illinois, beat Iowa State, beat Wisconsin, that's not the goal. The goal is to win a Big Ten championship.

To do that, we know we need to improve and get better every week. We've seen that with all groups, especially with the receiver group. The trick is it's only been four weeks. We might want to continue that process.

Q. When you look at Nate's growth, especially the last two weeks, it seemed like maybe in the Iowa State game, whether it was a confidence issue, was it always set with his feet, he's kind of almost seemed to be aiming a few passes. Did he kind of just go back to square one on some of his fundamentals to go into the UNI game? Did that help? Is that what happened?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Well, I think if you look at the Iowa State game I would start with giving a lot of credit to Iowa State and the way they played us and the way their defense came in. They had a good plan and they did a nice job disrupting us and taking away some of the things we wanted to do. Got us out of rhythm a little bit.

Certainly we probably didn't play as well as we wanted to at any spot. But the bottom line was when we needed a play, we came up with a play. It was a good route. It was a heck of a football that got thrown up there.

I think like anybody on our football team whether it's the quarterback or the right guard, when things aren't going the way you want them to go and those things aren't coming through as you might have visualized them or imagined they would, you certainly have to go back to basics, take a look at your fundamentals and

make sure you're doing things in a sound manner.

I think Nate's done a nice job over the three years I've known him of working hard every day to improve, and taking a look at what he's doing, what he's not doing while figuring out how he can do it a little better. But I think what you're seeing over the last four weeks is really the fruits of more like three years of labor than just a couple weeks of looking at this or looking at that.

Sometimes football is a cruel mistress. I heard Rory McIlroy talking about one time about golf and whether you're a play caller or a right guard, this analogy is pretty, you know, pretty fair. I think he said when you're playing well, it's hard to imagine a time when you weren't. And when you're not playing well, it's hard to imagine a time that you were ever playing well.

And at the time I think he was the number one golfer in the world saying that. So football's the same way. Sometimes things aren't going to go your way. Sometimes they are. No matter what, keep the emphasis on fundamentals and doing things in a sound manner and you at least have a chance to be consistent over the long haul.

Q. Curious how you guys handle replay and whether to challenge a call? How quick is that process?

BRIAN FERENTZ: There's not much of a process for us. I don't know if there's numbers... how many challenges have been won in college football? Can anybody think of one off the top of their head? I mean, I'm serious. Does anybody remember a challenge being won? You're wasting your time out.

The officials tell us in the locker room every single play in college football is reviewed upstairs. So if you challenge it, you're simply trying to make yourself feel better, I guess. You're not going to change the outcome.

The only way that something could be changed on the field is if it gets buzzed down. They take a look at every single play, and I know the NFL is a little bit different. When I was in the National Football League, nothing was reviewed. So the way a play got reviewed was if a red flag came out. Didn't matter if it was a scoring play.

Now they review every scoring play, I believe. I think every turnover gets reviewed now. They pretty much review everything in the NFL now too. So if you challenge a play, you're simply wasting a time out. I know that's not what people want to hear, it's not popular, but that's the reality of it.

We have officials come in our locker room before every

game and say, hey, listen, we're going to tell you right now if it's getting buzzed down or not. If you want it buzzed down and you call a timeout, if they buzz us afterwards, we'll give it back to you. But if they don't, you're not getting your timeout.

So the whole challenge thing I think is a little bit of a misnomer. I don't even know why it's available, because it's just kind of a waste of time. But everything gets reviewed upstairs, and those guys are pretty confident. They do a good job. If it doesn't come down, it doesn't come down. That means they didn't think it warranted any further review.

Q. There is a constant evaluation of your personnel, but once you get into season mode, that kind of narrows, I assume, except for injuries. Are there any players that are on the fringe? Tyrone Tracy, for instance, got in and made a nice catch against Northern Iowa. He's also a true freshman so you have that careful balance there. Is he the type of player or are there any other players that you're looking at going you want to get a little more of a look to see if they can help you out as the season goes on?

BRIAN FERENTZ: The new rule helps you a little bit. Tyrone has played in one game. Henry Geil has carried the ball in two games. Nico Ragaini has played in one game. So there are a couple guys that we've been taking a really hard look at. Whether it just be from a depth perspective or a perspective of, hey, maybe this is the guy that can help us as the year goes on. So the good news is with players like that we have two or three more games moving forward to get them involved, take a look at what they can do, and decide if burning that red-shirt is worth it or not.

Certainly Tyrone's one of those guys. I would put Nico in that category as well. Henry had to carry the ball a little bit just because we were down backs. Certainly we'd like to maintain his red-shirt if we could. But if we're in a situation where we only have so many healthy backs, then you have to do what you have to do.

But Tyrone's another guy that could carry the ball a little bit. We've worked him at running back and receiver at practice. He's done a lot of really good things in practice and started to grow a little bit. So he's a guy that could certainly get in the mix as time goes on here. But we have some other good players at that position too.

Really, when you play the way we play, you're probably only going to have two or three of them on the field at most at a time. So when you want to be is judicious about how you use a young guy's eligibility, thinking

about the future of the football team.

Certainly the goal is to win right now, but you always have to, you know, kind of juxtapose that with what's best for the future of the program.

Q. How has Shaun Beyer responded to a tough play on Saturday night?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Shaun Beyer's a good football player. Shaun Beyer's played a lot of football for us. He's been out there in a lot of special team situations. There was a miscommunication. Shaun Beyer was hustling, doing the best he could to help his football team. Something unfortunate happened. He's responded the way you'd expect anybody to respond. He came back to work and he's working to improve and get better and help the football team.

Q. You guys have struggled out of the bye the last couple years offensively specifically. Anything you've identified, tweaked or changed to be more prolific early in those games?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Sure, we always look at the schedule, whether it's the off-season, whether it's camp, whether it's the bye week, whether it's bowl prep. We're constantly evaluating and tweaking those things. We've looked at the bye week schedule. We've gone back to a schedule that we used probably three or four years ago. We just felt like that was the best thing for our football team right now.

But certainly, it's like anything else, whether it's game three, you know, go back to the UNI game, we had put an emphasis on starting a little faster. Didn't feel like we had started very fast in either of the first two ballgames. So we tried to tweak some things, change some things up, take a little different approach just with how we were doing everything from the hotel to pregame to how we were emphasizing what we were working on in that first drive. So we felt that helped us a little bit, got us on track.

But same thing last week, we wanted to try to get a fast start, and we did that. It will be the same thing coming out of the bye. We've certainly tweaked the schedule this week, but the emphasis will remain next week. What are we doing to help the players get going a little bit faster?

Q. Going back to the offensive line, as you mentioned, Cole Banwart had his first start, first real action. You still have two sophomore tackles, they're still sophomores. Ross Reynolds is just kind of the rotational guy last year, yet the way that they're gelling, whether it's Keegan Render's leadership or just collectively as a group, seems to be almost on a fast track despite their age. Is there

anything?

BRIAN FERENTZ: No, I think you've got a veteran guy in the middle like Keegan. I think that's a big help. Really, both tackles are fairly veteran. Both guys started, I think Wifs had seven games last year or eight. They've played a lot of football relative to everything else. But the bottom line is whether it's those guys, whether it's Ross, whether it's Cole Banwart stepping in, Dalton Ferguson who has been in the program five years stepping in there, both Paulsens have played a little for us. It really comes down to your work habits and how you do things every day on a daily basis for a year, or in the case of Dalton five years. In the case of the Paulsens, three-and-a-half years.

So I think what you're seeing is the cumulative effect of that work as those guys go out there. It's really hard to simulate a game environment until you get in it.

But if you've done the right things and taken the proper steps in your preparation over a long period of time, then I think you have a reasonable chance to expect to be successful, and you've seen that with those guys. So that's certainly encouraging. I think the main thing, it's like the rest of the team, can we continue to grow and build on that.

The bottom line is we're four weeks into the season. The season is very young. There is a lot of room to grow right here. But the flip side of growing, there is a lot of room to be stagnant and decline, so we're going to try to avoid those two things.

Q. Being an offensive line coach with Dalton, you've mentioned he's taking snaps at center. Did you see that versatility when he came in as a walk on? What is it like to see another story like that where a guy comes in, living his dream?

BRIAN FERENTZ: Dalton is a great story. He's a guy that, in recruiting, we really liked him. We knew he was very athletic. We felt pretty strongly about him. He was a guy that fell into the category that a lot of our guys fall into where not quite at the level we determined was scholarship level, but we're wrong quite often.

You've seen a lot of guys we determined that level to be did not go on to play for us. And there were a lot of guys we said weren't quite good enough that have gone on and played for us. He's one of those guys.

But athletically we saw a guy that could do multiple things and handled a lot, and he's certainly done that throughout his career. But unfortunately for the last two years he's had to deal with some injuries and overcome some of those things. He's done a nice job with that, and couldn't be more pleased with how he's responded from the spring on and just grown.

He's a lot of fun to watch. He's one of those guys that you're awfully happy for.

Q. Are teams taking away Noah Fant a little more than we can see, how would you evaluate how he's done?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I don't know what his stat line is. I don't know how well people are taking him away. He's been pretty productive for us. He's scored a few touchdowns and had a few receptions. Then it's like we talked about in the off-season. Certainly if you put good players on the field, people are going to come for them. And if they're accounting for them, can we get the ball to other guys? And I think we've been able to do that. I think it's opened up some of the rest of the offense, and that's all been positive.

I'm pleased with the production Noah has done. He's a guy we've tried to create match-ups at times, and we've been successful at times. Not as successful at others. But in the Wake of those match-ups, other match-ups have developed on the field for us and I think we've done a pretty good job of taking advantage of those.

Q. How often do you second-guess your play calls? You're inherently in a position where people second-guess you.

BRIAN FERENTZ: Never. We spend a lot of time on this we spend a lot of time being ready to prepare for these things and ready to execute them when the moment comes. If you're going to spend time second-guessing things, this is not a good profession for you. If you're going to spend time evaluating things and being very honest with yourself, and being hyper critical of your decision-making, and wondering if it was the right decision, and then being very analytic in how you look at that, then it's probably the right profession for you.

I don't think I've ever second-guessed anything I've done. There are certainly things I wish in retrospect I would have done differently or called a different play. If one play works, it's probably a good call. If it doesn't work, you probably should have called something else.

But I don't want to spend a lot of time second-guessing those things. You prepare for the moment when the moment comes. The decisions have already been made. You put them in the game, and if you've done your job properly, then things work. If you haven't, then they don't, and you need to go back and evaluate why it went wrong.

Q. Do you like being on the field better?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I prefer being on the field. I just like being on the field. You get a better feel for the game.

You're around the players. You can communicate with players. You can coach players. You can get information from players directly face-to-face. Just for me, it's a better place. It's a much better place for me. I'm not as good in a sterile environment. I kind of like the chaos down there, and I just like being down there. It's a personal preference, I suppose.

Q. In the heat of the moment, like a 4th & 1 or whatever, if you have just a few seconds to decide, how many plays are you usually -- does it come down to maybe two or three plays?

BRIAN FERENTZ: I think that's the misconception sometimes. There is not just a few seconds to decide. I don't know how many hours are in a week. How many hours are in a week from Sunday at 2 p.m. to Saturday at 7:40 p.m. when the ball is kicked off? A lot of hours. That's when all those decisions are made. That's when you take a look at what you think you're going to see, what you have available.

You practice it, you prepare it, you execute it, you rep it. You do it again. You rehearse it. You rehearse it in your mind. Then when the situation arises, the decision is already made.

Q. So no spur-of-the-moment decisions?

BRIAN FERENTZ: There's never a spur of the moment decision. When you're going for a fourth down in the spur of the moment, you're making a mistake, because you're not prepared. So when we go for it on fourth down, we know we're going for it on fourth down on Friday afternoon when we sit down and meet and make our strategy for the game. We know exactly what it is.

You look at the most recent fourth down attempt that we had, and we've had quite a few this season, but the most recent one we had were 3rd & 9 on the 14-yard line. We've gone backwards on second down, unfortunately. We're 3rd and 9 on the 14-yard line, and we put a certain personnel group in the game, we run a 3rd & 9 call that we felt good about. We knew that if we got to 4th & less than 1, it was an automatic go. There was no decision. When we caught that ball, we tried to go with a tempo play. We knew we were short.

At least we thought on the sideline we were short. Apparently we needed to review that, we did. But we tried to go with the tempo play, it got shut down. Then when we came out of it, we still knew either we were going with the first down play or fourth down play. The decision was already made.

The only decision was instead of -- obviously, we lost the element of tempo. So we changed personnel, and we changed the call, but we still knew we were going. We were either going to get a first down call or fourth down call right there.

Q. It seemed like when Reese Morgan makes an appearance, social media stories, a lot of former players can't say enough good things about Reese. Just what impact did he have on you as a player and now as a coach?

BRIAN FERENTZ: My first interaction with Reese Morgan was on the wrong sideline. He was the head coach at West Side my junior year at City High and they beat the bricks off us twice, once in the regular season and once in the playoffs. Then fortunately for us at City High, Reese came to Iowa.

So I always tease people and say my dad hired Reese here so we could win the boot, and it worked, we did my senior year.

Then Reese took over my recruitment, and what Reese means to me on a personal level is I was an undersized guy. I was not heavily recruited, and Reese believed in me, and I think a lot of kids from Iowa would tell you the same thing, and that means a lot because I wasn't highly recruited.

Northern Illinois was my only other offer. Coach Roushar, and Coach Novak were recruiting me, and I probably would have gone there. I always wanted to play at Iowa. I grew up dreaming of playing at Iowa. I wanted to play for Coach Fry. That obviously wasn't going to happen.

But they didn't want me. And your own dad didn't think you could play here, that's kind of tough. But I wasn't a scholarship player here. Reese kept banging the table and pounding the table for me. Then two, three days before signing day or whatever it was, now I've got an opportunity to play here, and I ended up getting a chance to play for Coach Morgan for three years, and I learned more about just being a human being and how to do things, even more than football. And there is plenty of football intermixed there.

So what Reese Morgan means to me is really simple: Reese believed in me when no one else did. And he's got a lot of stories like that, and a lot of guys that proved a lot of people wrong. Reese knows how to find the underdog. Reese knows how to measure a person's heart instead of maybe perhaps their measurables, and if you're a program like us, we live on those guys. So a guy like Reese is pretty darn important.

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Phil Parker



PHIL PARKER: First of all, I'd like to thank you guys for coming here and listening to me talk. I wanted to make sure we cover some of the defensive things, the progress we have in the first four games and see where our defense is really headed.

I'm very confident that you look at the game last week and we'll go back to that is Wisconsin, the atmosphere was great. We had a chance to win. We didn't win. Everybody is at fault. We lose as a team, win as a team, and I think our guys really learned some lessons from that game, and I think it's going to make us stronger here in the future.

Just touching base with our defensive personnel-wise, our D-line, is the strong point of our defense. We have enough guys up front that we can rotate and keep guys fresh so they can be productive on the playing field. Then also at linebacker, we've been having some changes go through there, but the ironic thing is the positives of the linebacker group, it really doesn't matter who starts the game. They're all in, and it's been very exciting to us.

Then on the back end, we do have some experience, so I think that's really been carrying out and helped us in between. We've got the guys up front. We've got the guys in the back that have probably the most experience, which takes a little bit of pressure off with the guys in between with the linebackers.

Obviously, when we go back and look at this, defensively what do we need to work on? Don't give up explosive plays. I know I talk about explosive plays all the time, and 25 yards to me is an explosive play. The first three games we gave up, maybe two -- one or two in a total of three games, and we were giving up eight points per game. Last week, we gave up three or more, and we gave up 28 points, so we definitely need to work on that.

On the positive side, the scoring defense overall, I think we're okay. We could be better than where we're at with 13 points a game. Our rushing defense is better, but I think we could also be better in that situation.

I think the opportunity for takeaways will come. We haven't got as many as we wanted, and we're looking forward to improving that.

But this week has been very good, very positive. We're moving on, and the best thing that we can do this week is to improve as a defense, and the best thing I like about it is the way our guys, the culture and the way they get along together with everybody, and that's been a positive.

The big thing is about improving where we are right now and getting ready for Minnesota.

Q. What is the plan at linebacker with Nick out?

PHIL PARKER: I think Barrington Wade has been playing out there, and he's been doing a good job in practice. So we're pleased to see where he's going. We'll probably move Kristian and he'll be taking some reps there at outside backer. He played there early in camp, and he has flexibility, so we're confident we can move him out there too. So he'll be taking reps at both places.

Q. You talked about the numbers and overall very good, and the turnovers aren't there. Is that just kind of one of those things that catches up eventually? Because the numbers suggest that maybe you guys would have more turnovers.

PHIL PARKER: Well, sometimes maybe you don't have as many opportunities to make. The teams that you're playing against, sometimes they protect the ball a little bit better than other guys. I think the first couple games that we had here, we probably didn't create enough of them or they were doing a good job of making sure that they made everything a little bit easier for either the quarterbacks and the running backs holding on to the ball a little bit more, but we just haven't got them.

Q. Early in the spring Amani Jones seemed to have a lot of equity in the program as a starter. He was mentioned throughout the spring, certainly in the summer. Then within a couple series of the first game he was pulled and Jack Hockaday was in. Was it anything that you anticipated that he might struggle with as far as whether it was just recognition or being in the right place at the right time? I mean, what happened?

PHIL PARKER: Amani Jones is still an important part of our program. He's done a great job in the special teams, but he's also been a great leader. When we get

in together and run the field and we're on the sideline at a timeout or anything, the enthusiasm and the energy that he brings to the guys on the field that are actually playing is a positive.

Yeah, so there's been sometimes that we say, hey, we'd like to be a little bit better in this, a little bit better in that. But everybody could say that about every position. It's just right now we feel that Jack (Hockaday) is the best guy that can help us move forward and have a chance to win every game. Not saying that Amani won't get back in there, I think he has a lot of upside and we like his energy, and we like the way he can find the ball. Sometimes we're going to have to put him in there and we have to live with some mistakes that goes on. But we're very pleased with the way he's handled the situation and how positive he's been.

Q. How good a player is Amani Hooker?

PHIL PARKER: Amani Hooker is a good player. It's hard to say where he stands up with some of the guys I've coached here. But he does have some skill sets that enable him to maybe play a little bit of man-to-man coverage down and the opportunity to see the field a little bit more. I think he has a good sense of football knowledge and awareness.

I think he's a good football player. I think he has a lot more that he could have a lot more upside, and he's working on that every day, and that is the great thing about him and Jake is the way they work and go about their work preparation-wise, and the way they go to practice. They come to work. They go out and play hard. They understand the game. They talk football.

It's like having another coach on the field. Maybe like a Sean Considine or a Bob Sanders, those guys, they talk football, they understand it, and they ask the right questions.

Q. I'm not going to ask you to speak for Seth Wallace, but what did Seth tell you guys when he came upon Amani in Minneapolis?

PHIL PARKER: We found him. He's a guy we liked as a football player on film. We didn't know what his status was as far as eligibility. We were still trying to figure out a little bit more about his grades. But we just know he came from a good family and had his brother playing basketball at a high level. We knew there was some skill in the family. We thought he would fit our profile.

He exceeded that, and I think he's going to be a very, very good player here in the future. He's obviously doing well so far.

Q. Is he too valuable to put back on punt return as

a returner, or has he still been in the mix there?

PHIL PARKER: He's been in the mix. I think he has really good hands. He has the ability to catch the ball, and he has good running ability. When that opportunity comes, I'm sure that I would recommend that he take a look. I think he's been working back there. So wherever that process goes and who makes that decision I think it's moving on with LeVar and the head coach, and what is the best fit for us.

Q. Julius Brents, his opportunity he got on Saturday night, how did you think he did, and how has he played overall so far?

PHIL PARKER: I think he played okay. As a true freshman, it's hard to come in and compete at this level. You don't have much time with them in the summertime to really prepare and understand the whole defense that we're running, so it kind of limits you when you go in there and try to call a defense. How much can he play, and how much does he understand that? I think he's done a good job to this point. He does have a lot of skill, but doesn't have a lot of experience yet.

But we're happy in the progress that he's making. He's a very smart, intelligent kid, and the more he goes, he's going to be a really good player.

Q. Has Epenesa shown you the first four games he's an every down guy and his role can increase?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, the way he's been working is really good. The one thing about it, we always want to make sure the depth of our defensive line, and the multiple positions that the guys can play inside and outside and make sure that our guys are fresh, I think has been more productive.

If we played him more, would he be as productive? That's the thing you've got to really watch out.

I really think the way we're handling the situation, and it worked out the first four weeks, is that 25, 26, reps a game has really been his potential to really make some big plays.

Now, obviously, you want to keep on doing that and pushing them forward, and I think he will the more you go on in practice.

Q. Is he playing the run?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, he's playing the run. He's starting to play the run the way he should. So we're pleased with that. He's making progress, and I think it's a matter of -- the decisions are made, when do you put him in, what series, how long did the series go? Sometimes they rotate by series. Sometimes they rotate -- what was that series? Was that an eight-play

series or was that a three-play series? And the rotation sometimes you've got to make sure you keep track of how many reps they're getting.

Q. The defensive ends that he's rotating with, how well are they playing? They appear to be both playing pretty good.

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, I would think so. If you just go back by our rush defense, it is somewhere like 85 yards a game, with those guys playing at that high level, to play good on first and second down. He has an opportunity to come on third down and make things happen and get off the field, which is pretty good.

So, sometimes, he's learning how to get those guys on third downs. When he's playing on first and second down, we can get into third down. Can he be effective on third down, if he played on first and second down.

Q. Weak side linebacker right now, is Djimon your guy going forward?

PHIL PARKER: I think he's played well. I think Djimon and Kristian both have to go in there. We've put Amani a little bit in there, working him a little bit maybe at the Will. So we'll find a guy in there, and I think as we go moving Kristian back out and giving him some reps at the Will backer might help us out in the long run.

Q. What has surprised you the most of the linebackers as a unit?

PHIL PARKER: I just like the way they're all into it and everybody has bought in. Nobody really cares who is the starter. Everybody understands that they might play. They might play ten, they might play 15. They might play the whole game. Just the way they are unselfish about how the thing -- what is best for the team.

When you go out to practice and you evaluate every play, every snap that they're in, there is going to be a guy that's up above somebody else. That's just the way it is. It makes your confidence level that, hey, I feel best with this guy today.

Sometimes I can go out there and say at any position and say, boy, he really didn't have a good day. But I know, I know him, I know the history. He's still the best player to play. Then sometimes when you don't actually, hey, there's a guy that's making it tough, them are the hard ones.

The easiest thing for me to do is sit there and I evaluate guys. Sometimes a guy might be running with number twos. He might be a little bit down. Hey, I'm not starting. Why am I not starting? Well, you've got to gain my trust, okay? Sometimes guys go the other way, and they say, you know, it's not that important to

me to hustle, effort, whatever. But the guys make the decision. If I know this guy is playing, this is a guy I'm counting on because he impresses me the most. He's the one I want to count on when it's tough, when you've got to make a decision, a split-second decision.

When it's really tough as a coach is when they're really playing well together, and you really don't know who is better at what. They've got some good qualities here, some good qualities there. This guy would be good against the run. This guy might be good against the pass.

Well, tell me when it's going to be run or pass and then I'll put him in.

Q. The other day when you went to a dime package, I think you had Kristian as your single linebacker, and you went to goal line and you had Amani in there. Is that how you're trying to par some snaps in, because maybe they are better in those situations?

PHIL PARKER: No, I think it's all based on personnel that we see on the film. In the Wisconsin game they had some heavy guys in there. They had an offensive lineman in a tight end's jersey, and they switched that back and forth during the game. We knew it, but we weren't notified.

One thing that we knew was they've got heavy guys in there, we've got to get big guys in there. We have to match their personnel. When they get fast guys in there, I thought we could match it up with our dime personnel, and we actually put Hooker down and put him on the tight end and the bigger guy on the tight end that can move. Those are the decisions we made during the week. And we made them a long time ago. We made them early in the week.

Q. Is there somebody we haven't seen yet that maybe you've identified?

PHIL PARKER: Yeah, there are some other guys that are going to help us on the way. I think there's a guy that sticks out to me, and he's already been playing on special teams, Riley Moss. I think he's really done a good job in the secondary to help us out. I think Kaevon Merriweather has done a good job. So he's progressing, where that's a safety spot. Another guy that can help us inside.

So I'm looking at those guys, and that's what this week is all about, is to make sure we're pushing the guys that have a chance and that have played a little bit, and are we going to, you know, play more than four games with them or are they going to get red-shirted? And if we can see the progress with them and they can help us win, we're going to make sure that they're on the

field trying to help us win.

Q. With Neimann's injury, does that mean Seth Benson, for instance, he played quite a bit as like a second-teamer early on in the fall camp. Does he move up into that maybe number two role?

PHIL PARKER: He's definitely been working that spot right now, and that's where he's the back-up. But also playing Kristian back there, so, knowing that, hey, the red-shirt thing is still there.

So we have him at both places. He's done a very good job. I can also see right now we're going to keep him outside because I think he does a good job and understands what's going on. But at some point in time in his career, he probably could bounce back inside.

Q. How has the red-shirt change affected your day-to-day?

PHIL PARKER: It doesn't affect me at all, because I'm not going to get red-shirted (laughing). But, what it does to me, I mean, we're going to play the guys that we think can help us. The big decisions are going to come later down the road. You might be on the 10th, 11th, 12th game, you're on the 12th game, do we really want to play this guy?

We've got the 12th game and we have a bowl game. Is it worth it to them? Because usually you get a thousand snaps in the year if you're the starter; 800, 900 snaps if you're a starter, that's pretty good. Now, do you just want to have four games you might have played 20 in each game, you've got 80 plays, do you want to buy that thing back or do you want to waste that? Can I get 800 plays out of them? That's at least 700 to 800 more plays that I get a valuable, good football player.

So it's kind of been nice to play some guys early when you have to, and I think you play them on special teams. And some guys we're full bore already saying, hey, they've got to play. Like Julius Brents, we're going to let them play. Riley Moss, they're too valuable at all positions on special teams. And they have a factor where they could be an impact on our defense. So we won't have anymore discussions about those guys.

It's the other guys that might have a few part-time jobs that are going on.

University of Iowa Football Media Conference

Wednesday, September 26, 2018

LeVar Woods



LEVAR WOODS: Appreciate everyone taking the time to come up and visit with us. Where things are special teams wise at Iowa. There have been some highs and some lows, some good and some bad. I've seen some young guys emerge, and some older guys doing what they've been doing.

I think if you watch us and study us over the last three to four weeks, I think there are some times where you'd say, hey, wow, they're on track, and there are some other times where we shot ourselves in the foot a little bit.

That being said, we keep plugging along, we keep working every single day and trying to improve and trying to help this football team from a special teams standpoint. That being said, any questions?

Q. What were the two most recognizable errors the other night on special teams? What was the film review of each of those with Shaun Beyer?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I would say this, with Shaun, it's just bad ball security. Or not Shaun, excuse me, with Kyle it's bad ball security. He'll be the first to tell you that. You should always have the ball on the outside arm. He'll be the first to tell you that. It's a deal where he had a really good return, had a really good thing going, and boom, the ball pops out. I know he's sick about it today as we all are.

But Kyle is an accountable kid. He's the first one to step up and say he screwed up. He's always out there fighting for his teammates. I think the guys out there like blocking for him, because they know he could be a force back there for them and for this team, and he'll be the first to tell you that, myself included.

With Shaun, it comes down to communication. And I'm not going to say that that's Shaun's deal. That's a team deal on our part. All of us involved in communication, all 11 guys on the field, and all of us on the sideline are involved in communication, and that's something we're working on.

Q. Is that regarding more the returner, because he's the one that can see the ball, kind of like a center fielder, if you will? And he kind of lunged toward the ball at that point, so it almost looked like nobody knew what was going on?

LEVAR WOODS: Sure, he's like the quarterback back there. The quarterback gets all the glory when things go well, and he gets all the blame when things go poorly. It's no different than being a returner. It all starts there. But it's a team deal. It's 11 guys on the field all working for one common goal. We've all got to recognize it and be able to see it. But it starts with the call, starts with the communication, and all of us are involved in that.

Again, I bring up the sidelines as well, because we all have to scream it as well from the sideline.

Q. From your vantage point, was Shaun blocked into the ball?

LEVAR WOODS: I think Shaun was working, hustling, knowing he had a good returner back there, and kind of got knocked into it.

Q. Do you think there will be changes on the return team?

LEVAR WOODS: No, I don't think that. We've all seen some really good stuff from Kyle. He has made some plays that we've all been happy with. That being said, there are some things that we've got to fix, and that's not just him or one person. It's a team effort. It's all of us involved, starting right here, and then we've got to get it fixed.

I think too, if you've watched and studied us close, we're very, very close to being a dangerous return unit. A couple things, we're talking about turnovers from the other night, you also go back a game or two that there are some opportunities that we gave up from a penalty standpoint. We negated a 30-yard return or negated a 23-yard return. Those are hard to come by punt return-wise. And you have a returner back there that can do that, and those are things that we need to take back and get back.

Q. How has he built that kind of equity in your program just two years, really one year now as a player? Was it just the way he worked last year when he came in on the scout team?

LEVAR WOODS: Kyle's not the only returner we have. I think we have some good, capable returners. But talking about him specifically, I think he's built equity with his teammates and how he works and how he approaches everything and the way he goes about his

business.

Again, you mentioned last year on scout team, I think it started there for him, and then progressed kind of going forward this way.

Again, this isn't just about one person. Everyone's involved. Everyone's out there. There are other guys that we have that can return the ball, and think that the unit itself in general, I think we're very, very close to being a good unit, being a dangerous unit, to a play here, a block there, communication here or there away from being a really good unit. We keep working every single day, and that was a point of emphasis for us today in practice. So keep working on it from here on out.

Q. Have you looked at Devonte Young, a guy that's offensively it hasn't quite worked out for him, but he seems to be working really hard in special teams, whether it's punt block or back, returning kicks. Whether he gets the opportunity, does he set an example for players that even if you're not achieving maybe what you'd hoped for on one end of the ball, that you can still work hard?

LEVAR WOODS: Sure. I think that's what this program is built upon. Guys finding a role and executing the role to the best of their ability. Speaking specifically about special teams, Devonte has done that. This is your role, this is what it's going to be right now. All right. How can I be the best that I can be at that role?

For him, it's been special teams, and he's helped us out in some situations. He's a guy that has some experience. He's in his third year now. He's a guy that can help us on all different phases as a core player and also as an off returner and things like that in the return game. It's been fun watching him kind of progress, And those other guys out there too that are working hard.

Q. Brady Ross every week, what's he showing you to earn that trust?

LEVAR WOODS: Yeah, I think Brady, I think everyone in the room and everyone on this team will look at Brady in that regard. He doesn't say a whole lot, but he works incredibly hard. He leads by example. When he does speak, people listen and people know he's serious when he does speak. He's a very genuine person.

He's a guy, like I said, by example, first and foremost how he works and how he goes about his business.

Q. You look at the strides that Colton has made what can you attribute that to based on last year, he was pretty inconsistent. This year he seems to

put the ball where he needs to put it?

LEVAR WOODS: I think Colton, we've mentioned this before in previous press conferences, I think he's been very, very diligent how he goes about his work right now. I think he was embarrassed from last year. He'll tell you that, personally embarrassed. And I think he's taken it upon himself to really be diligent and work hard at what he's doing and be better at his craft.

He's not where he needs to be yet and he's not where he's going to be, but I think he's on the right track. He's on the right track, and I think he's in a position to keep performing and keep doing well.

Q. How much have you had to arm wrestle Phil or Brian to get guys on special teams?

LEVAR WOODS: I just go to the head coach, and he says yea or nay. We look at everybody on our roster, who can help on special teams. I try not to use guys that I know are key to a certain play or key to a certain position that, hey, if we were to lose -- let's say we put Nate Stanley back there as a returner, that would not be very smart, okay.

But that being said, we're trying to do everything we can to help this team all three phases, offense, defense and special teams, so we're trying to find the best guys for that role.

It's not always a starter that's the best for that role, if that makes sense. There are some guys that maybe don't get the opportunity to play on offense or defense, they may be better suited for a specific role on special teams, so we look at them first.

But both coordinators, offense and defense have been very forthcoming, very willing to say, hey, go ahead, use them, whatever you've got. So our thought right now is we'll try to use the starter for two, maybe three phases at the most, then after that we're not going to use them for six phases, if that makes sense.

Q. Is Hooker one of those key guys up front? Is that why he's key?

LEVAR WOODS: Hooker has been back there returning punts. He's fielded some balls back there as well. That's sort of more scheme related or a game-plan related than anything.

Q. Amani Jones the other day he brings such energy. He must be a guy that you like having on there, because he's obviously physical, but he also kind of has that special teams energy.

LEVAR WOODS: I don't think it's any secret I love Amani Jones on kickoff coverage. Just as you said, he brings a different energy. My comment to him was where has he been, you know? I've been waiting for

him. But you hit the nail on the head where he does bring a different energy in how he covers kicks. When you watch that play closely, he was actually blocked on the ground and got up and still made a woo-hoo hit as you termed it.

couple other snappers that could step in and do the job as well. Jackson has been the guy that's been in there, and he's done well so far.

But love Amani Jones, love his energy, love what he brings to the table.

Q. Not a lot of punt returns or at least very few, how satisfying is that for you?

LEVAR WOODS: That's part of our scheme, it's part of what we're trying to do. We're trying to limit returns as much as we can. On the return aspect, we're trying to get as many returns as we can. If you look globally around the country, college football returns are up from a punt return standpoint. Even for us they're up. I think we have 11 returns so far this year. That's up from this time of the year typically over the last three or four years.

Again, if you look across the country, all numbers are up punt return-wise, so it must be punters are getting better.

Q. The rugby style is kind of new. I don't think Kirk liked it as much a few years ago. Other teams were doing it, and now he seems to be all in. Is that because the college rules are so much different than the pro rules? Where the pro rules a couple of guys can be the gunners. In college everybody can leave and it gives you that extra second to get guys down the field?

LEVAR WOODS: I think the rule set it up. In the NFL only the outside guys and men on the line of scrimmage can go down before the ball is punted. That's totally different in college, anyone can go down as soon as the ball is snapped.

So I think that lends to that scheme, and it lends to the different formations you see in college football, allowing you to get extra gunners down the field. It's helped us out, and we're not only a rugby unit.

We also traditional punt as well. So I think just more -- I think in general we've done that. It's been good for us. We're not the only team in the country or in our conference that does it. It's been effective for people. You know, hey, when the job is to get field position, whatever we can do to get the field position is what we're going to do.

Q. Wanted to ask you about the long snapper. So that means things are going all right.

LEVAR WOODS: Are you trying to jinx us? Yeah, I think Jackson stepped in, and Jackson has done a good job. Jackson's not the only one. We have a